

Debunking and Debating the Meritocracy Myth

Have you ever carried blame that wasn't yours, because it felt easier than confronting how unfair your situation truly was? Coping strategies exist to mask reality but consequently create shared fictions that ignore the true issues at hand. Poverty and the ever-growing lower class in Latin America are issues that begin at the government level, yet they have been projected as responsibility of the individual. The belief that anyone can climb the social ladder through sheer hard work alone has become an ingrained shared fiction, driving people to madness or migration. The role of economics and politics in social mobility has been overlooked, which limits momentum to pressure the government to reform. This essay shows how the popular belief that "hard work is enough" upholds Latin America's unequal class system, and how realist films that reveal the dangers of migration can destabilize that belief, opening space to imagine policies and cultural attitudes that support genuine upward mobility.

This "grindset" mentality stays alive partly because repeated cultural messaging, from TV dramas to political campaigns, defines success as solely dependent on personal determination. Telenovelas, a core source of entertainment in many Latin American countries, often reinforce underlying messages such as the "hard-working hero rises" trope. Commonly, they showcase a protagonist from a poor, working-class background who endures hardship with perseverance and kindness. When they inevitably break through barriers, their success is framed as earned through good effort and character. Ignoring the structural inequalities that left them in the lower class to begin with, these narratives teach the fiction that upward mobility is accessible through a strong work ethic and good attitude. Telenovelas that noticeably utilize this preachy trope include "María la del Barrio" (1995) and "Teresa" (2010). Beyond shows, governments also use TV to propagate this fiction through polished commercials and national campaigns. These emotionally charged, inspirational ads encourage viewers to believe in themselves by implying that the state is fulfilling its role, and therefore the individual must simply fulfill theirs. Together, these messages normalize a worldview where systemic barriers fade into the background, leaving personal effort as the only success-factor that society can see.

But alongside these uplifting and misleading fictions, there are films that pull viewers back to the realities people face across Latin America. "La Misma Luna" (2007) depicts a common response to the lack of opportunities and impossibility to get ahead through hard work

alone: emigration. As is the case with thousands of immigrants, the film's main character travels to the United States in search of work. She sends money home while working relentlessly in LA and saving every dollar in hopes of bringing her young son to the States. When her country failed to provide stability for a hard-working, single mother, her only remaining option was to chase opportunities elsewhere. An even darker consequence of blocked mobility is found in "Maria Full of Grace" (2004). María works long hours on a Colombian plantation, tied to exhausting, low-paying labor by the combined pressures of supporting her family, an unexpected pregnancy, and limited education. Cracking under the pressure of living in survival mode, María is enticed to become a drug mule. Her story exposes how the absence of actual pathways upward pushes people towards dangerous risks when honest work cannot realistically secure a future. Both films disrupt "hard work is enough" fiction by revealing the structural barriers that keep people from advancing. The emotional intensity of these movies makes viewers feel the fear and exhaustion these characters endure. Instead of glorifying perseverance, they show how effort alone cannot overcome systems built to hold people in place. In doing so, the films reframe migration and desperation as consequences of inequality, not personal shortcomings.

By contrasting the culturally accepted fiction with harsh reality shown in film, it becomes clear that lasting mobility requires more than inspirational rhetoric and hard work. To begin addressing these issues, governments across Latin America must refocus on serving their populations rather than advancing policies that primarily benefit the elite. They must rebuild the middle class by empowering small businesses, taxing them fairly, removing red tape, and creating conditions in which non-elites can thrive. Local businesses generate new opportunities, which support families and strengthen long-term economic stability. While the fiction of hard work alone opening doors was narrow and misleading, progress still depends on continuing to put in effort. It's not a matter of choosing between personal effort and structural support; it's a "yes and" situation (yes to hard work and yes to a "hand-up" from the government). A society that is not sharply divided between the rich and poor is achievable, but only if people look beyond the long-standing myth, recognize the need for reform, and continue pushing towards a future in which every person has a real chance to rise.